

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

For Release December 8, 1978

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MOST AID TO STATES FOR WILDLIFE PROGRAMS TO CONTINUE UNDER COURT AGREEMENT

Federal funding for most of the 600 State wildlife conservation projects throughout the nation will not be affected immediately by a court-ordered agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and humane interest groups.

The lawsuit was brought last March by the Committee for Humane Legislation and others and charges the Federal grant-in-aid program with noncompliance with the National Environmental Policy Act. NEPA requires a comprehensive environmental impact statement on all Federal action having a major or significant effect on the quality of the human environment. The Service published a draft environmental impact statement on the overall program on June 30 and will release the final version, now completed, signed and being printed, in about two weeks.

The suit is being heard by United States District Judge Charles R. Richey in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia.

The agreement, reached November 27 and signed December 5, specifies that the Service will not renew funding for any of the project grants that come up for renewal for at least 60 days. However, Service officials estimate that only about 10 percent will expire over the next two months, with most coming up for renewal on July 1. The Service does plan to approve new projects during this time after assurances that they comply with the National Environmental Policy Act. In 1978, almost \$63 million in Federal funds was distributed to the States which employ about 2,000 biologists, technicians and administrators under the Federal aid program

for wildlife. In many States the only professional wildlife management capability available is provided for under this program.

Partially at issue in the lawsuit is whether an environmental impact statement is required for each individual grant, many of which are for administrative support and for conducting routine surveys and counts of wildlife.

In addition to refraining from refunding projects which come in for renewal, the Service also agreed to provide 12 items of information on each of the 600 grants in question. The information, to be provided within 60 days, includes such items as whether the projects involve habitat manipulation, or result in any significant air, water or land pollution, or whether they disturb or result in the death of any birds or animals. The humane groups will have 30 days to review the data and then both parties will confer on which projects, if any, require an environmental impact statement.

The Federal grants are authorized by the 1937 Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act. Federal funds come from excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition and archery equipment and are apportioned to the States on the basis of land area and the numbers of hunting licenses sold. In addition, a certain portion of funds is distributed on the basis of population, and may be used by the States for hunter education programs.

Projects to be funded, such as research or the acquisition or improvement of suitable wildlife habitat, are selected by the State but must be approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service. If approved, the State is reimbursed for up to 75 percent of the expenses incurred in carrying out the project. Many are multi-year projects that must be renewed annually. None will be renewed during this 60-day period.